Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Midnight Dress

Written by

Karen Foxlee

Published by

Hot Key Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

Text copyright © Karen Foxlee 2013

First published in Australia in 2013 by University of Queensland Press

Cover based on an original design by Kirby Armstrong for University of Queensland Press

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form
by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without
the prior written permission of the publisher.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance
to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0237-1

1

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc

Hot Key Books supports the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading
international forest certification organisation, and is committed to printing only on
Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper.

www.hotkeybooks.com

Hot Key Books is part of the Bonnier Publishing Group
www.bonnierpublishing.com

Anchor Stitch

Will you forgive me if I tell you the ending? There's a girl. She's standing where the park outgrows itself and the manicured lawn gives way to longer grass and the stubble of rocks. She's standing in no-man's-land, between the park and the place where the mill yards begin.

It's night and the cane trains are still.

It is unbearably humid and she feels the sweat sliding down her back and she presses her hands there into the fabric to stop the sensation, which is ticklishly unpleasant. She lifts up the midnight dress to fan her legs. It's true, the dress is a magical thing, it makes her look so heavenly.

The shoes she's wearing are too big. She's tripped once already walking in them, across the park, away from the town. She drank some wine earlier, cheap wine, behind the rotunda. She can still hear the harvest festival. A voice over a microphone proclaiming what a wonderful night it is, then music, a slow out-of-time waltz. She can hear the crowd too, the deep rumble of voices and the sudden shrieks of laughter.

She feels excited. The girl doesn't think she has ever felt so excited. It's been building in her for weeks, this breathless rushing sensation. She feels the gooseflesh rise on her arms just thinking of it. She's exactly where she is meant to be; that's what it is, it's like a homecoming. It's like her dreams. She puts a hand on her stomach because she has butterflies and, with the other, adjusts the coronet in her hair.

She doesn't know how she should stand when he arrives. She doesn't know if she should have one leg in front of the other like a beauty queen or legs side by side. Should she lean her back against something as though she isn't so excited, standing in that place, clutching the little black purse in her hands? What will she do with the purse? When he goes to hold her, how will she put it down—will she just drop it? She's trying to sort these things out in her mind.

What should she say? Her mind is perfectly blank when it comes to that. Usually she can think of words, but now she can't think of anything. Maybe something will come when he arrives. Something funny, maybe, or seductive, or both.

When she hears footsteps, her heart nearly jumps out her mouth.

She laughs.

"Where are you?" she whispers, because she can't see him yet.

It's dark. Suddenly it feels darker, as though a cloud has passed over the moon. She looks up to check, but there is the moon, newly struck, white-hot. When she looks back, he's there. He looks as shocked as she, but then he smiles.

"What are you doing here?" she says.

Rose arrives one night in January when the barometers are dipping and there is not a breath of air in the wide empty streets. The palm trees along the main drag hang their despondent heads and

women fan themselves in open doorways hoping for something, some little breeze. Old ladies watch the evening news, take hankies from their bra straps, and wipe their top lips; in public bars the sweat drips from chins. And already in countless darkened bedrooms, on beds beneath ceiling fans that thump and whir, girls lie dreaming of dresses.

The rain comes in sudden exhausted sighs and spontaneous shuddering downpours but does nothing to alleviate the discomfort. They drive down the main street and Rose thinks it looks like a shitty little place. She's an expert on such things. They could keep driving except there isn't enough petrol left. The service station is closed. That alone sums up the town. They turn across the train tracks where they see a sign proclaiming PARADISE JUST 7 KMS AHEAD.

Paradise is a caravan park. Her father kills the engine and sits still, gripping the wheel. Rose can hear the ocean; the sudden intake of its breath, as though it has remembered something, something terrible, but finding there is nothing it can do, it breathes out again. The night is dark and starless.

"It's as good a place as any," he finally says.

She gets out and slams the door.

"Shit."

Toads leap before every step.

The kiosk is shut too. There's a bell for after-hours arrivals, which she rings, but no one comes. When she gets back to the car, her father is still sitting at the wheel. She reaches in and takes the keys from the ignition. He doesn't flinch. Typical. She knows exactly what will happen next. He will stay there all night thinking. He'll try to solve the problem as though it is a huge and

complicated theorem, but in the morning he'll realize it is all very simple. He'll stumble from the car and into the caravan, pulling the little curtain around his bed, and his shaking will begin.

"I'm going to bed, Dad," she says.

"Okay," he says, staring out at the dark.

She can't attach the power until the kiosk is open, so she moves through the dark in the caravan until she reaches her own small bed. She opens the drawer beside her pillow, feels for her brush, undoes her hair. She brushes it out, seventy-one strokes, and ties it in a braid. She remembers her mother doing exactly the same thing. The memory is hazy, golden, like an overexposed photo. She presses both her eyes until the image burns and is replaced by tears.

Stupid. It's stupid to cry.

"Stupid," she says aloud.

It's raining lightly. It patters softly on the caravan roof. When she was small, her father said that was God drumming his fingertips. She can hear the sea very clearly, its sharp breaths and exhalations, the whole night around her, thinking. She lies down, presses her eyes again.

If she had a light, she'd write something in the little green notebook she keeps. The words would be clumsy as bricks, she knows it, and later she'd tear out the paper, ashamed. In the book she keeps a column of words she hates. First is the word *grief*. She hates the sound of it. It reminds her of a small wound half healed. The word doesn't encompass at all the emotion, which has no edges. It rises, a giant cumulus cloud. It surrounds her, dark and magical. At night when she presses her eyes, she feels she could quite easily levitate, held up by that cloud, float out the little

window above her bed. It would take her over the town, the truck stop, the highway, the cane fields, the paddocks, the bush. That is how she would like to describe grief. She wishes there were a word as powerful as all that.

She goes nowhere. Stays pressing her eyes. She listens to the rain until she falls asleep.

Pearl Kelly half listens to the others talking about the new girl in the seniors' bathroom. She sits on the bench with her legs stretched out while the others are huddled around the dull metal mirror staring at their smudgy reflections. She is half thinking about the kiss too, Jonah Pedersen's kiss, which was cool and wet and not at all what she was expecting. It was different from Tom Coyne's. His kisses had always been small and tight and dry. They had been rhythmical, as though he were beating out a tune with his lips. Tom Coyne had known how to kiss, even in grade seven.

It's disappointing, all of it, because she had waited so long for the Jonah Pedersen kiss, when she needn't have. Everyone had been waiting. And now it's there, all messy on her lips, and she just wants to forget it. Worse than that, she could tell afterward that he was embarrassed. That he knew he was bad at it when everyone thought he was so perfect. It's an ugly secret.

She drifts back to the girls' conversation.

"She's really unusual," says Maxine Singh.

"Ugly unusual?" asks Vanessa Raine, who is the most beautiful girl in the school and likes to keep track of such things. "Or odd unusual?"

"I saw her in Mrs. D's office," says Shannon Fanelli, "I mean

just the side of her. I think she might have really bad skin, or maybe they were moles."

"Or warts?" says Mallory Johnson.

"I saw her from the front," says Maxine. "She's actually kind of an unusual pretty."

"Except for her hair," says Shannon. "She has this crazy hair in two buns tied up with about one thousand bobby pins."

"Hello," says Rose, entering the bathroom.

She doesn't have a bag. She's carrying just one pencil. Her uniform is way too big. She looks at the hem lengths, the hair, the way they are staring back at her with their lip-glossed mouths just a little open, calculates immediately, in a fraction of a second, that she will never fit in.

"Hi," they say in unison.

"Hi," Rose says again. She can tell she'll hate it. She always does. She touches her hair to make sure no stray curls have escaped.

Then Pearl jumps up from the bench, smiling.

"Geography or French?" she asks.

The truth is it should be geography because Rose has never taken French. Rose looks at Pearl and tries to think. The girl is a perfectly normal height, with perfectly proportioned limbs, and perfectly pretty in a golden-haired, sun-kissed kind of way. Exactly the kind of girl that Rose likes the least. But is she a geography or French kind of girl? She doesn't look exotic. *Exotic* is not the word for Pearl Kelly. She looks like she might like coloring in the layers of the earth. She'd take great pride in it. She looks like a

girl who would feel quite at home with vile words like *tectonic* and *magma*. She would understand map scale.

"French," Rose says aloud.

"Excellent," says Pearl.

Rose's heart sinks.

The truth is she wasn't even going to go to school except that Mrs. Lamond, who runs the caravan park, vaguely threatened to go to the authorities. Mrs. Lamond is small and leathery. Sometimes she paints her eyebrows on and sometimes she forgets.

"Will you be here for long, then?" Mrs. Lamond had asked.

Mrs. Lamond can tell holidaymakers from drifters. This father-and-daughter outfit are drifters. Another sorry affair.

"Probably," Rose had said.

"Better enroll in school, then," she said.

"I'm fifteen, nearly sixteen," Rose informed her. "I don't have to go to school."

"School would be the best place for you."

Mrs. Lamond doesn't like the scrawny girl with the sad eyes who comes into the kiosk and thumbs through the magazines but never buys. "And while we're at it, this isn't a library."

Rose had put down the article "Seven Sexy Ways to Wear Your Hair," touched her pinned-down curls.

The truth is the first morning she had discovered that the beach was in fact a paradise, a little cup-shaped bay fringed by rain forest. She had stepped out the caravan door and stared at it, rubbing her eyes. She had walked past the car where her father still slept, all the way to the soft white sand. When she dipped her toes in the sea that morning, she broke its smooth olive-green

skin. And when she turned, she saw the mountain, looming behind her, sitting sage in its skirt of clouds.

"Shit," she said.

Her father stumbled from the car into the caravan. He pulled the curtain to his own corner, stripped off, lay beneath his sheets. Over the next days the caravan filled up with the smell of his sweat. He grew oblivious. She wrote that word in her notebook. OBLIVIOUS. He was oblivious to the sea, which changed color through the day, green to blue to turquoise, the huge clouds that raked shadows across its surface and then flung them onto the mountain face. The waterfalls she could see, high up on the rocks. The startling eruptions of rainbow-colored birds.

Rose did exactly what she always did. She performed her ministrations. She made him toast, let it cool on the bench; it was all he could eat. She bought two-liter bottles of Coke from the kiosk, which seemed to soothe him. She wet a towel and he laid it over his body like a shroud.

She brought these things to him soundlessly, went on bare feet, sand still patterned on her legs, said nothing.

"Thanks," he said once.

Once, "I'm sorry."

Rose spent the rest of her time exploring. She climbed over the rocks at the right side of the bay and found another beach, exactly as perfect and completely deserted. She thought about moving her stuff there. A few items of clothing, her green notebook; she could empty out her little drawer into her little black plastic bag. She could build a shelter out of palm fronds. All she'd need was matches and a blanket. She would be able to find water somewhere. She fantasized about these things at length sit-

ting on the beach or floating on her back in the sea. The clouds built all day and each night they burst and the rain that fell obliterated all other sounds: the sea, her breathing, her father's restless turnings.

"What's up with your dad, then?" Mrs. Lamond had asked. "Is he sick or something?"

"A bit," said Rose, running her fingers along the snow-shaker domes containing plastic reef scenes. "But he's getting better."

"I like your hair," says Pearl in first period, French.

Rose had used a black rinse. She'd walked all the way to town to buy the stuff and hitchhiked back with a man in a truck full of watermelons. It had cost her nearly twelve dollars on account of all her hair, money that could have been spent on food or petrol.

The rinse made her hair more coarse and wiry than ever.

"Serves you right," her father said, sitting on the edge of his bed tentatively, watching her with his long thin sorrowful face.

The first morning of school she ties her hair in two buns on either side of her head. It makes her look like she's wearing headphones, which makes her laugh. She walks to the caravan park showers and outlines her eyes in thick black eyeliner. There is nothing she can do about her thousand freckles. She examines herself in the mirrors.

"Ugly bitch," she says, then goes and waits at the place that Mrs. Lamond says the bus will pass.

She thinks at the school office they will make her wash off her makeup but the headmistress, Mrs. D'Addazio, doesn't even seem to notice.

"Lovely," she says, looking at Rose. "The girls will be so excited to have a new friend. We're a small school, very small, and how old are you, here, you're fifteen, so that's just lovely, you'll be able to take part in the Harvest Parade, that is on at the end of May, we have our very own float at Leonora High and all the girls are on it, you'll have to find a dress. All the girls have dresses made. We call it dress season here. It's a tradition, I guess you could call it that. Can your mother sew?"

"I don't have a mother," says Rose.

"Oh darling," says Mrs. D'Addazio, "I'm so sorry, of course you don't. Well, don't worry, I'm sure we'll find someone who can help you."

Rose keeps her face implacable.

"I mean it's a really nice color, your hair," Pearl adds in French.

Pearl's fluorescent highlighters have tumbled out of her pink pencil case and rolled across to Rose's side of the table. Pearl leans to retrieve them. She has no idea about the rules of personal space, Rose decides. Pearl Kelly smells of coconut and frangipani.

"I have a highlighter dependency," says Pearl.

Rose looks at her and away.

Pearl writes with the highlighters, mixing all the colors, big letters, tangerine and lime and lemon and cherry pink. She adds huge exclamation marks and instead of dots there are love hearts above each letter *i*. It makes Rose feel faintly queasy. She taps her black nails on the desk so that Pearl can see them.

"I think you're going to really love it here," says Pearl.

* * *

In French they have to form pairs so Madame Bonnick can hand out their group assignments.

"Just stay with me," whispers Pearl, which is *très* annoying.

She has arranged her highlighters *très* neatly.

"Good idea," says Madame Bonnick. She speaks French with a terribly nasal accent. "*Bonne idée*. Pearl will look after Rose. These are the roles that you will play for the assignment; you will pick them from the hat, and there will be no negotiation. For each role you will prepare two minutes of dialogue and the more impressive you are with your roles, the more imaginative, the better. I am talking props, *mesdemoiselles et messieurs*. I am talking costumes."

Pearl picks a piece of paper from Madame Bonnick's hat.

"Oh goody," she says.

"No way," says Vanessa across the room, because she has picked the Hunchback of Notre-Dame. She flicks her long blond ponytail and starts to argue for a redraw.

At recess Pearl insists Rose sit with them.

"Honestly, where else are you going to sit?" Pearl says. "What are you eating?"

"Nothing," says Rose.

"Are you anorexic?" asks Shannon with a hint of excitement.

"Here, eat my apple," says Pearl. She hands it to Rose.

There are six girls in all: Vanessa, Pearl, Maxine, Mallory, Shannon, and now Rose. They begin to talk of dresses.

"Have you picked your color yet, Pearlie?" asks Vanessa. "The color of the year is aquamarine or hot pink or anything metallic. I'm not telling you what I'm having but it's along those lines. It is going to be the biggest surprise. I'm having sequins all across the

bodice. My mother did my colors. She is totally psychic with colors. She can do yours if you want but I think you'd be an autumn. People who are autumn should never wear gold. There are lots of other colors that you can choose from."

"Are you going to eat that apple or just look at it?" Pearl asks Rose.

Pearl Kelly has brown eyes, very dark. She's nodding at Vanessa but her eyes are laughing. She winds her hair up on top of her head and sticks a pencil in it.

A boy comes over to the group. He's tall but slouches his shoulders. He peers out from beneath his shaggy bangs, talks very slowly.

"Hey, correct me if I'm wrong, but I didn't know there was a Star Wars convention on," he says, looking straight at Rose's hair buns. "Lucky I brung my light saber."

He gropes his crotch for effect.

"Fuck off, Murray," says Pearl. "Your light saber is the size of a peanut."

He lopes away, his work done. Rose ticks him off in her head as someone to hate passionately.

"Honestly, don't worry about him," says Pearl. "You'll get to know him; he just thinks he's really funny."

"Where were we?" says Vanessa.

"I don't know what color I'm going to wear," says Pearl. "I don't know what season I am. Maybe one of those weird seasons that isn't really a season, like Indian summer."

Vanessa flicks her bangs back with an angry twitch.

"This is serious," she says.

"What color are you going to wear, Rose?" asks Pearl.

"I don't even know what you're all talking about," says Rose, and her voice is husky from disuse and weeks of her own company clambering over rocks and pretending to be shipwrecked.

"It's the Harvest Parade," says Maxine, "and it's been going on for one hundred years or something. They burn the cane and then there's this big parade and all these floats and all the girls have to wear a dress and one of them gets to be the queen and some get to be a princess and then everyone kind of dances in the street."

"Weird," says Rose.

"It's not weird," says Vanessa.

"If you were a meteorological phenomenon, Rose, which would you be?" asks Pearl to annoy Vanessa even more.

"A summer hailstorm," says Rose quietly.

She takes a bite of the apple.

They had seen one, she and her father, phosphorescent green, coming across the downs. Her father had stopped the car and they stood watching it approach, lazily at first, then suddenly racing, whipping up the earth and bending trees, until they were scrambling for cover on the floor of the car.

Vanessa smooths down the already mirror-smooth surface of her blond hair.

"Are you saying you're going to wear green?" she asks.

"I'm not wearing any crummy dress," says Rose. "I'm only here for a little while."

"Good," says Vanessa, "because girls with red hair and freckles should never ever wear green."

"I'd love to be shipwrecked," says Pearl after biology.

Rose has offered her the tiniest morsel herself, told her about

the hidden bay. She can't believe she has, it goes against all her ground rules, it's only half past one on the first day. She's been to too many schools to remember. She knows exactly how it all works. But Pearl has worn her down with all her kindness.

Damn. She kicks herself. Pearl is unstoppable.

"I know exactly which bay you mean. It's exactly like a place you would get shipwrecked on, like in a movie. Like Robinson Crusoe. Do you remember that show? I'd love to be marooned and just drink coconut milk and wear a grass skirt. I can't wait to travel. I'm going to go away as soon as school is over. That is exactly what my mum did. I'm going to Russia, first stop, that's where my father came from. No kidding. I never met him. Not yet. I am the result of a brief love affair. My father, he'll recognize me straightaway. We'll be in this crowded station. He'll put out his arms to me. He'll smell like snow and pinecones. I do care about school but I can't wait till it's finished. I don't know what I'm going to be. Do you know what you're going to be? How are we meant to know what we're going to be? My mother says life is the greatest educator. She danced in a chorus line in Paris when she was eighteen. And she was in the circus too. She could eat fire. I mean she still can. She says love is the only thing in the world that really matters. Now for this French assignment, I have this old froofy costume thing, I mean I think it was when I was Little Bo Peep in ballet but it might still fit me, and I probably have a crown. So what I'm saying is I think I should be Marie Antoinette. And maybe you could be the executioner and you could make the guillotine. Do you ever have recurring dreams? I dream about this place. It's this big piece of sky over this town I don't know, I mean a trillion stars. I don't know where it is and I've

never been there before but it must be somewhere I'm meant to be. I'm always arriving there from somewhere else and I've been on a great journey. Do you believe in that sort of stuff?"

"Shit," says Rose. "I don't know."

"Sorry," says Pearl. "I talk too much."

Pearl shows Rose the way to art. The day has heated up, the afternoon clouds crowding the sky. It will rain soon. Already Rose can tell from the way everything has grown breathless and still, the air is right up close and personal, it's like walking through honey.

"But do you know what you want to be?" says Pearl.

Rose bites her bottom lip. She thinks of climbing on the rocks at the beach, which is her favorite thing but hardly a career choice. And her green notebook, where she writes her stories, her stupid embarrassing stories, as if she'd mention that.

"God, Rose," says Pearl. "It's just a question. Don't look so scared."

The caravan seems even smaller after school. Her father is sitting on the step waiting for her. It's the first time he's been up. Really up. His eyes have cleared.

"Nice beard," says Rose.

"Thank you," he replies.

He always grows a beard. Sitting there without a shirt, he has a biblical air with that beard. He might stand up and proclaim something, point a stick at the water and part the sea. He is always freshly chastened when he gives up drinking. His forehead is smooth; there is none of the treacherous twinkle in his eyes.

"How was it?" he says.

"How do you think?" says Rose.

"I made you some pancakes," he says.

"That's weird," says Rose.

"Come on now," he says. "Can't I be kind?"

"It doesn't really suit you."

She goes inside and sees he's taken out his sketchbook and one pencil. Soon he'll draw again. Hesitantly, as though he can't remember how. He'll start to notice the world. He'll say will you look at that sky, what do you think of that, Rose? He'll think aloud about paints.

On the bus home, light-saber boy had sat in front of her. It was deliberate. She'd narrowed her eyes and looked out the window. He seemed newly grown tall, didn't know what to do with his great lengths of legs and arms. He smelt. He needed to wash his shaggy brown hair. Rose ignored him as hard as she could, stared right through him as he turned to her.

"I was only mucking about," he had said. "Today, you know. The whole Star Wars thing."

"It's all right," she had replied, glancing at him, not smiling.

He played the drums with his fingers on the back of his seat. She ignored him until he turned back and put his earphones on.

"There was this girl who never shut up," Rose tells her father. "And these other girls. They're all going in some parade. Everyone goes in a parade here. It's like some pagan thing. Something to do with harvesting the cane. Everyone has to buy a dress."

Her father raises his dark eyebrows.

"Don't worry," she says. "I won't be doing it."

"You can do it if you want," says her father.

"Have you ever seen me wear a dress?"

Later she goes to the beach and draws her name in the sand. ROSE LOVELL. Large curved running writing with loops and petals. ROSE LOVELL. Rose Lovell does not wear dresses. Rose Lovell does not need friends. Yet all she can smell, even with the huge sky and the evening storm clouds brewing, is coconut oil and frangipani.